



# Sacramento County homeless deaths reach a 12-year high in 2014

'The number of homeless deaths has just skyrocketed'

By [Raheem F. Hosseini](#)  
[raheemh@newsreview.com](mailto:raheemh@newsreview.com)

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**Technically speaking, Donna Rae Blacksmith** wasn't homeless when she succumbed in January to the cancer that ravaged her body. But the years spent living on the streets—battling the elements, toiling with illness and tragic luck alike—caught up to her well after she clawed her family to stability.

Cancer was simply the official diagnosis. The real cause of death was plain to everyone who knew the 50-year-old mother of two.

“Because she was poor and didn't have any health coverage, she didn't have much of a voice,” said Women's Empowerment executive director Lisa Culp, who met Blacksmith through the local nonprofit about a decade ago. “She was just a beautiful, remarkable woman.”

Tomorrow, December 19, that remarkable woman will be recalled during a solemn new tradition here in Sacramento County. At 7 p.m., people will gather at Trinity Cathedral for the second time in two years to remember all the homeless brothers and sisters who passed on in 2014.

Even before the New Year, there are 90 names to be read.

“The number of homeless deaths has just skyrocketed,” said Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness.

Between January 2002 and June 2014, 604 homeless individuals perished in the county, according to coroner records reviewed by the coalition, Sacramento Steps Forward and county health officials. That's a rate of roughly one death every week for the past 12 years.

As of December 15, Erlenbusch and his colleagues have counted 90 homeless deaths this year. That represents a 33-percent increase over last year's toll and more than double the number of homeless deaths in 2012, with still a couple weeks to go.

There's no one explanation for why more homeless Sacramentans are expiring. But there are some troubling markers through the first six months of this year, with significant increases in the rate of homeless people dying outdoors and from substance-related causes and injuries. The interfaith service, scheduled for the Friday closest to the start of winter, was timed to accompany the coalition's release of this disturbing new data.



The number of homeless people who have died, according to the second annual Homeless Deaths Report.

*Click on the image for a larger version.*

ILLUSTRATION BY N&R STAFF

Last year's inaugural Homeless Deaths Report provided Sacramento County officials their first glimpse at the scale of the problem. In June, county supervisors chiseled \$260,000 out of their fiscal year budget to dispatch public nurses into homeless encampments to enroll people onto Medi-Cal. Erlenbusch said the county has been "doing a pretty good job" of it, but pointed to an unexpected wrinkle: Some managed-care providers are turning away insured homeless individuals because they're not used to treating that population, he said.

Like last year, the 102-page report includes recommendations for elected leaders and health officials.

One goal is educating managed-care providers on hunger and homelessness. The report also calls for increased funding for year-round shelter and respite-care facilities, as homeless deaths are spread evenly throughout the seasons and hospitals routinely discharge recovering, post-operative homeless patients to the streets.

"Having winter shelter isn't good enough," Erlenbusch added, referring to the privately funded program between November 24 and March 31. "We need year-round shelter to keep people safe."

For the first year on record, women made up a quarter of the tabulated homeless deaths, up from a previous 12-year average of 13 percent. According to the cumulative data, homeless women also tend to be more vulnerable to internal diseases than their male counterparts.

Culp said Blacksmith became homeless shortly after quitting her job to home-school her autistic son, on the advice of his kindergarten teacher.

It was through Sacramento Loaves & Fishes that Blacksmith found Women's Empowerment, where she graduated from a job-training program and went to work as a Paratransit driver for Wheels to Work in 2008. The position entailed piloting a mobile-employment van and serving as a community-outreach ambassador to those like her. It was the first time Blacksmith had health insurance, but it lapsed by the time she walked into an emergency room the summer of last year with severe aches and pains. By that point, the aggressive cancer had reached vital organs.

"As a homeless woman only a few years prior, Donna had learned to suffer in silence," said her longtime social worker, Erie Shockey. "When she finally stood up for herself, it was too late."

Blacksmith leaves behind her 18-year-old son and a 12-year-old daughter. The son lives semi-independently in a group home. The daughter was taken in by a family that is struggling to make ends meet. In an email, Shockey wrote that "this grief-stricken child will need a community of caring souls ... so she, too, will not slip into homelessness."